

# SIDDHI

## Essay on Yogic Power

Historical Introduction to Yoga and Early Indian  
Traditions of Meditation  
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# - सिद्धि -

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## 1. Introduction

When a western person first acquaints themselves with *yoga*, they would probably only come in touch with what Elizabeth De Michaelis calls “Modern Postural Yoga” - a system mainly comprised of *āsana*. But when one delves deeper into the world of *yoga* and *tantra*, one begins to hear fantastical stories of *yogis*, often times in deep seclusion, performing feats of the mind and body, seemingly defying the laws of science and logic, on the one hand, and apparent spiritual leaders, said to possess such abilities due to their yogic efforts, on the other.

It is generally accepted that there is no reliable scientific data to confirm the reality of *siddhi*. It is not clear whether these “powers” or “attainments” are of positive or negative influence on the practitioner who happens to “attain” them. In his major work on Yoga, Patañjali defines them as being misfortunes (*upasarga*) in *samādhi*, yet as attainments in awakening (*vyutthāna*) (3.37). It is also not clear, whether these *siddhi* are (only) a product, precursor or obstacle to *samādhi* or a combination of these. The *Yogasūtra* (henceforth YS) not only lists, but also instructs on the methods and mechanics of these powers, occupying most of the *vibhūti* and *kaivalya pādas*. The description of *siddhi* does not end with the *Yogasūtra*.

In the later text of the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*, for example, the author instructs on the performance of purification techniques, such as *jala neti* and *śankā-prakshālana*, specific *āsana*, diet management etc. where

[a]long with the instructions for these procedures, the medieval texts explain the practice based on secret knowledge will produce magical powers, immortality, and [...] good health, immunity from disease, and cures for various ailments. (Alter 2014: 71).

What is alluded to here is, perhaps, some form of the system known as *kriya yoga* as it utilizes a lot of the practices of *hatha yoga*, but in a much more complicated way, employing *prāṇa-vidya* in order to bring about spiritual awakening without the interference of the mind. In other texts, the reader can encounter perplexing descriptions of practices, designed to prevent ejaculation and thus retain the sexual energy in the body (e.g. *vajroli mudra*):

[o]nly by sperm it is possible to obtain the *amṛta* by which the body the body is rejuvenated as *siddha*. It is very valuable, and the necessity of having an

optimum quantity of sperm in the body is emphasized by every tradition. (Wright 1989: 65)

Let us briefly examine the texts dealing with these super-normal abilities and then look at the accounts of some of the people, who have claimed to witness or perform them.

## 2. *Siddhi* in the *Yogasūtra*

When reading the YS directly, one cannot help but notice that all yogic practices can apparently lead to *siddhi* at one point of spiritual evolution or another. The aim of all yogic practices is non-attachment (or *citta-vṛitti-nirodha*), including the exhaustion of one's karmas (YS 4.30) - in the end: to “master and control the process of worldly engagement” (Chappell 2012: 224).

Two words are used to describe these practices. The term *vibhūti*, [...] derives from the verb root *bhū*, ‘be’, prefixed with the intensifier *vi-* meaning ‘manifestation of might, great power, superhuman power.’ the term *siddhi* initially appears in the second *pāda* where it refers first to the perfection of the body and the sense (YS 2.42), and then in regard to the perfection of *samādhi*, which stems from the acts of [commitment] (*īśvarapraṇidhāna*, 2.45). The third *pāda* states that perfection of the senses can actually inhibit skill in *samādhi* (3.37) and the fourth *pāda* lists four paths to attain perfection: innate ability, drugs, recitation of mantra, austerity (*tapas*), and *samādhi* (4.1). (Chappel 2012: 223)

### 2.1. *Chittamātra*, *vijñanamātra* - mind only:

In some Buddhist *Yogācāra* texts the attainment of *siddhi* is linked to the concept of mind-only (Chappel 2012: 225). The logic is that the outward object of perception does not exist and all experience arises from the *grāhya-grāhaka* relationship, i.e. perception and, in the extreme case of this proposition, the world itself, are nothing, but a construct of the mind as perceived by the senses (the mind itself being one of the senses), hence transcendence of these is a path to certain attainments. One can encounter very similar ideas in the text of the YS.

In *Yogācāra* tenets the senses are the usual five, plus the mind and two additional forms of wisdom: *mano-nāma-vijñana* (consciousness by the name of “mind”) and *ālaya-vijñana* (“store-consciousness” - theoretically quite similar to the concept of *saṃskara* in the

YS). As long as one becomes aware of the above principle of *sūnyata*, the world can, in theory, be manipulated through consciousness alone. A wrong grasping of that leads to materialism and *avidya* and if powers arise, one can also develop *rāga* (passion) towards the *siddhi* themselves (see 3.1).

## 2.2. *pariṇāma*: Transformation

Since, according to the YS, mastery of the mind and body are the first step towards union, the text gives instruction on what should be done and explains the structure of causal transformation:

According to *yoga*, the structures underlying perception can be reformed and directed away from lethargy and passion (*tamas* and *rajas*) towards the illuminative (*sattva*). In the *Yogasūtra* altering the world begins with altering the mind. The starting point is *pariṇāma* – the fivefold process of transformation. (Chappel: 2012: 225)

The five *pariṇāmas* (Chappel: 2012: 225) (YS 3.9 - 16):

- (i) *chitta nirodha*: mastery of withdrawing the mind from the world
- (ii) *samādhi*: dissolution of objectivity
- (iii) one-pointedness of mind
- (iv) stability, definition and specific qualities within the realm of the elements and the senses.
- (v) time: past, present and future

The process of going through the above five can be summarized as a systematic realization of causality. Some relation may be drawn between this concept and the *sūnyata* (mentioned above) in Madhyamaka Buddhism, where in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* Nāgārjuna (ca. 150-250 AD) equates dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*, i.e. causality ) with lack of own nature (*svabhāva*) and *nirvāṇa* – the supreme realization. If to call these interchangeable would be irresponsible from a historical point of view, it is likely they are not entirely unrelated. When the five *pariṇāmas* are perfected (e.g. achieved mastery of), mastery over the transmutation of matter (see 3.1) can manifest.

According to Patañjali, change is threefold [YS 3.13]: (1) the succession of qualities of form and substance (*dharmā-pariṇāma*) (2) the chronological sequence itself, i.e. past, present and future (technically known as *lakṣaṇa-*

*pariṇāma*) and (3) the [...] forms of manifestation (or *avasthā-pariṇāma*) (Feuerstein 1989 [1979]: 102)

Through the perfection of these, according to the text, one transcends time:

YS 3.16: *pariṇāma-traya-saṃyamād-atīta-anāgata-jñanam*

**Through constraint on the three [forms of] transformation [comes about] knowledge of the past and future.** (Feuerstein 1989 [1979]: 104)

### 2.3. *Saṃyama*: constraint

The third *pāda* of the PYŚ deals exclusively with supernatural powers. These are the result of a special kind of meditation called "combination" or *saṃyama* that is defined in YS 3.4 as being the combination of steady concentration (*dhāraṇā*), meditation (*dhyāna*) and integration (*samādhi*). Through the perfection of that, an aspirant is able to realise the causal links of reality:

YS 3.5 *Taj-jayāt prajñā ālokaḥ*

**Through mastery of that [*saṃyama*] [there ensues] the flashing forth of [wisdom].** (Feuerstein 1989 [1979]: 97)

In 3.17 the reader finds further strong similarities to the *Māhāyana* world-view, where dependent designation stops one from being capable of *prajñā* or insight, whereas its transcendence grants knowledge of *Śabda* – the primordial cosmic reverberation of all things:

YS 3.17: *Śabda-artha-pratyayānām itara-itara-adhyāsāt saṃkaras tat-pravibhāga-saṃyamā sarva-bhūta-ruta-jñanam*

**[There is a] confusion of presented ideas [wrong conceptualization], object and word [corresponding to dependent designation] [because of the] superimposition on one another. Through constraint upon the istinction of these [constituent elements] knowledge of the sound of all beings[/elements] [is acquired].** (Feuerstein 1989 [1979]: 105)

Further in the PYŚ through the following actions one can attain a myriad *siddhi* (loosely adapted from Feuerstein 1989 [1979]):

ॐ YS 3.18 Through direct perception of *saṃkarās*: Knowledge of previous births

- ॐ YS 3.19 Through direct perception of *pratyaya*: knowledge of another's consciousness
- ॐ YS 3.20 Through disruption of the light reflected by the body: invisibility [like accounts of yogis removing their images from photos when undesirable in recent times]
- ॐ YS 3.21 Through constraint on *karman*: knowledge of death
- ॐ YS 3.23 Through constraint on friendliness: power (*bala*)
- ॐ YS 3.24 Through constraint on power: elephant-like powers
- ॐ YS 3.25 Through focus on the flashing forth of mental activities: knowledge of the subtle, concealed and distant
- ॐ YS 3.26 Through focus on the sun: knowledge of *bhuvana*: creation
- ॐ YS. 3.27 Through constraint on the moon: knowledge of arrangement of the stars
- ॐ YS 3.28 Through constraint on the polar star: knowledge of their [the planets'] movement
- ॐ YS.3.29 Through constraint on the navel wheel: knowledge of the arrangement of the body.

Here one encounters two fascinating topics. One - yet another Buddhist theme, namely – the author begins to describe energy structures in the body beginning straight from what would later be called *manipura*. Since in Buddhist Yoga, *kundalini śakti* resides at the *nābhipadma* and not in the perineal centre (later *mūlādhāra*), the lower energy centres are not recognized as significant. Secondly, no reference is made to the lower *cakras* (*mūlādhāra* and *svādhiṣṭhāna*), which is possibly an indicator of their later development, yet, as we are going to see, the other four are apparently present in the text as significant points for a yogi to study and constrain on, yet they are not yet substantialized and integrated in a system of *cakras*. For example, the following verse (YS 3.30) may indicate an early form of later practices associated with the energy centre called *vishuddhi cakra* and the “consumption of *amṛta*”, or alternatively: a minor *cakra* – *lalana*, directly thought to be associated with the production of [said] immortality substance (Satyananda 1999: 245).

- ॐ Through constraint on the “throat well”: the cessation of hunger and thirst YS 3.30

ॐ YS 3.31 Through constraint on the *kurma* (tortoise) *nāḍi*: steadiness

ॐ YS. 3.32 Through constraint on the light in the head: vision of the *siddhas*

The theme of “light in the head” may refer to some concept of *bhṛumāḍya* (or perhaps *ajna cakra*). That may also have some correlation with the later depiction of a black *śivalingam* (as symbol of unmanifest consciousness) at *ajna cakra* and the association of it with an inner *caitanya-jyoti* at this place. Satyānanda also writes that meditation on *ajna cakra* produces a psychic vision of “a flaming lamp shining as the morning sun”. Such an aspirant is capable of entering a foreign body, as well as becoming spontaneously versed in the *śāstras*. One who meditates on *ajna* can acquire all *siddhi* associated with other centres and practices through this practice alone (Satyananda 1999: 123).

ॐ YS 3.35 Through constraint on the heart: understanding of the nature of consciousness

ॐ YS 3.38 Through the relaxation of causes of attachment and through the experience of going forth, consciousness [is capable of] entering another body.

ॐ YS 3.44 Through constraint on the coarse, the own form, the subtle, the connectedness and the purposiveness [the *yogin* gains] mastery over the elements (see 3.1)

ॐ YS 3.45 Thence [results] the manifestation, such as atomisation etc, perfection of the body and the indestructibility of its constituents.

The above verses can consequently be interpreted as precursors to the ideas of *anāhata* and *sahasrāra*, where especially the second leads directly to the topic of one of the most extraordinary-sounding *siddhi*: *parakāya-praveśa*, since it is the energy centre regarded as the point of transcendence.

According to legend, *Śaṅkara* possessed the dead body of king Amaruka of Benares in order to win a philosophical debate with the *rāṇī*, he had to acquire knowledge of *kama* and as he was a *saṃnyāsin* and thus celibate, that was quite out of the question. In his own body, that is. Swami Rama claims to have witnessed a demonstration of this power performed by his *paramguru* in Tibet, where the holy man dematerialized by “turning into a cloud” (i.e. “atomised”, cf. YS 3.44 below), entered a wooden plate, where the plate became much heavier, then exited and materialized his physical body once again (Rama 1999: 330-



331). Another record of this can be found in White (2009: 30), where the “yoga that affords the power the power of entering into other bodies (*yogam-anyadehapraveśaram*)” is mentioned. In Rama (1999) one encounters an account of just such a passage of consciousness from one body to another, where an old *sadhu* is supposed to have discarded his aging body and occupied that of a recently deceased youth. Likewise in Vajrāyana Buddhism there are stories of the so-called rainbow body, where a practitioner who has achieved a high level of spiritual proficiency is able to disintegrate his body at the moment of his passing into pure light. The two processes may rely on similar mechanics or principles. The *Kaivalya pāda* describes the mechanics and the process of attainment of the above listing of yoga powers in great detail.

### 3. Some modern writings on and accounts of *siddhi*

#### 3.1. Transmutation of matter

Swami Rama gives a somewhat grizzly account of an alleged application of this principle of transmutation of matter by an *aghorī baba* he met near Srinagar in 1942. There had been a *brahmin* visiting the holy man in question and he had told the *brahmin* that a corpse was floating into the river and that he should bring him some of the flesh. When the shaken *brahmin* came back, the *aghorī baba* had put the human flesh in a pot and had begun cooking it. The *aghorī baba* had stated he was a complete vegetarian. When he served the food the flesh had allegedly turned into rasgulla. When asked why he eats human flesh, the *sadhu* replied: “Why do you call that a *corpse*? It is no longer human. It is just matter, which is not being used.” That *sadhu*, according to Swami Rama, had the power to transform pebbles into sugar cubes, sand into almonds and cashews etc. (Rama 1999: 274-275).

#### 3.2. Yoga powers and *kundalini yoga*

In modern times the attainment of *siddhi* has been associated with the tantric practices of *kriya* and *kundalini yoga*. According to Satyānanda there are seven ways to awaken *kundalini-śakti*: (1) by birth, (2) by mantra, (3) by *tapasya*, (4) by tantric initiation, (5) through herbs (*auśadhi*), (6) through *rāja yoga*, (7) through *pranayama*, (8) through *kriya yoga* or (9) through *śaktipāt dīkṣā* (“*śaktipāt dīkṣā* [is] energy unleashed by the guru’s „grace

bestowing power (*anugraha-śakti*) (p. xxxviii)” Brooks 1997). He describes the association of the awakening of the different principal *nādis* with the potential realization of particular *siddhi*.

If *pingala nāḍī* is awakened, for example, the aspirant becomes a “healer, one who has control over nature, matter and the mind”. Respectively for *īḍā nāḍī*, one attains prophetic qualities and foresight. When *susumnā nāḍī* awakens, Satyānanda states, then *kundaliṇī-śakti* ascends and the aspirant becomes a *jīvanmukta*. For this, practices such as *mahā mudrā*, *mahā bheda mudrā* and *kumbhaka* are recommended (Satyananda 2001: 80). Milder paths like *rāja yoga*, according to him, can also lead to powers.

Following awakening through raja yoga, changes take place in the aspirant. One may transcend hunger and all addictions or habits. The sensualities of life are no longer appealing, hunger and sexual urge diminish and detachment develops spontaneously. (Satyananda 2001: 43)

Attachment to *siddhi*, which can be viewed for some perspectives such as stated in YS 3.37 Satyānanda associates with the *Rudra granthi* – the third psychic knot in the *cakra* system:

“Rudra granthi functions in the region of ajna chakra. It is associated with attachment to siddhis, psychic phenomena and the concept of ourselves as individuals.” (Satyananda 2001: 117)

The text of *bhagavatī stotram*, attributed to Vyāsa, speaks of *siddhi* being the result of devotion. A modern tantric interpretation would be that Devī is Durgā – i.e. the more controlled state of *kundalinī* after passing through its rough, newly-awakened state as Kālī.

*jaya bhagavati devī namo vara-de* (1.1)

**1.1: Victory to you, Oh, divine goddess, I salute you, bestower of boons.**

*jaya vāñcita-dāyinī siddhi-vare* (5.4)

**5.4: Victory to you, Oh Goddess, who grants wishes and the most excellent *siddhi***

As can be seen in the writings of Satyananda Sarasvati, the ascent of *kundalini* by whatever method is associated with certain *siddhi* or attainments:

3.2.1. Awakening of *kundaliṇī* through *tapasya*:

With the awakening through austerity lower qualities of the mind manifest with great force. The aspirant must face and overcome the power of *tamas* and emerging *saṃskāras*, powerful and haunting sexual visions, weight-loss and strong worldly attachment.

At this juncture, siddhis can appear. One develops extrasensory perceptions, one can read the minds of others, and can suppress others by thought, or one's own thoughts materialize. In the beginning, black forces manifest and all these siddhis are negative or of a lower quality. *tapasya* is a very, very powerful method of awakening which not everybody can handle. (Satyananda 2001: 41)

### 3.2.2. *Auśadhi*: *kundaliṇī* awakening through herbs

Many people, both in India and in western culture have attempted to reach higher spiritual experiences through the use of drugs and psychedelics and such substances have been part of many cultures for millennia. The subcontinent is no exception and if one were to go to a Hindu *mela*, one would find a large amount of hashish being consumed by the holy men accompanied by extatic calls of *Hara Hara Mahadev!* or *Om Namah Shivaya!*. However, few are truly acquainted with the art of *auśadhi*.

*Auśadhi* is the fastest and most powerful method of awakening *kundalini-śakti* according to Satyānanda. Since it can transform the body and its constituents, it should never be attempted without a competent *guru*. The explanation is that “certain herbs selectively awaken *ida* and *pingala nādis* and others can suppress both these *nādis*, quickly leading one to the mental asylum”. That is why, Satyānanda says, *auśadhi* is very unreliable (Satyananda 2001: 41). [This is part of the narrative of “undesirable or dangerous” powers D.W.]

## 4. Conclusion

Many modern alleged *siddha* are in discrepancy with the idea that *siddhi* are just side-effects of yoga – they demonstrate and are not shy about their “abilities”. This, combined with the Indians' deep-rooted belief in the holiness of *sadhus* creates fertile ground for fraud and attempts are being made to educate the ordinary people about these “holy men” and their tricks. Modern *gurus* claim to have these powers which have great attraction to people, as they

consider them signs of holiness, but 99% of the times they prove to be nothing, but a mouse in a coconut (evil demon), magically produced holy water (double-wall water-pot), a handful of saltpetre (a ball of fire ), etc. That, or the famous “production” of a golden *śivalingam* by Satya Sai Baba, for example.

Patañjali himself does not take on the task to classify *siddhi* as either positive or negative. Such powers can arise and then diminish in the process of spiritual evolution. When they are taken as a goal, however, one cannot transcend further, simply because in their minds that has become the goal of their *sādhana* and thus a power has become a limitation to the mind, preventing one from achieving further transcendence of consciousness.

In the end, whether by meditation, asceticism, *rāja yoga* or the mystical experiences of *śaktipāt* or the *darśan* of *Ma Kundalini*, whether the existence of *siddhi* is actual, in the face of no scientific evidence, boils down to what one chooses to believe. There is no doubt, however, that *siddhi* have been and will continue to be a fascinating and enigmatic aspect of the *yoga* phenomenon.

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